

The Arts and Government in New York State
a statement by the Executive Director of the New York State Council on the Arts
for the Council's 1971 -72 Annual Report

Earlier this year there was an exchange of letters in an upstate newspaper between a member of the Legislature and one of his constituents, the president of the local art society. The latter was defending government support of the arts against the charge that the arts are a luxury, or only the concern of an elite. Calling the legislator's attention to the officers named on his society's letterhead, he listed their occupations: schoolteacher, plumber, operator of an employment agency, wife of an electrical contractor, school administrator, wife of a printer, blacksmith, wife of a doctor, and so on. "Very enlightening," he added, "and the rest of our membership runs the same way – not one professional artist, but all very much involved, everyone finding a chance for much personal meaning and happiness; and to them it is not a frill, but a very important part of their lives."

"In this time of financial crisis for our state," the legislator replied, "I believe it to be most unjust that millions of small taxpayers are forced to help subsidize activities in which they have no interest, and in many cases are much opposed to. I have no objection to people who want to indulge in such activities, but I don't think the general public ought to pay for it. We have far more pressing needs such as schools, hospitals, and highways, and money must be found to carry on the essential programs rather than diverting funds for programs which may be enjoyable, but are certainly not essential."

One could scarcely ask for a clearer contrast between the opposing views that the arts are or are not properly a public concern, or a clearer indication of the fact that the very idea of state funding for the arts is so new that challenges to it are still fundamental – whether it should in fact exist, whether among the competing priorities of a sorely stretched society the arts rank high enough to merit support from the taxpayers. It is important that these questions be asked, for an agency of government, if it is not to go stale, must be subject to constant scrutiny and criticism; and the New York State Council on the Arts – which this year administered an appropriation of over \$14 million to support arts organizations and to make their resources more available to the public – is no exception.

The purpose of the New York State Council on the Arts, is to provide the people of the State with services they desire but could not, for reasons that are primarily economic, otherwise obtain. It does this in large degree by funding in part, but only in part, the operations of many hundreds of organizations which, taken together, compose the sector labeled "non-profit arts" in the economy of the State. That is to say, they constitute an industry, and one which further stimulates other forms of business and industrial activity. But it is also somewhat peculiar, since it is essentially a handicraft industry which is undercapitalized and has hitherto sustained itself by relying on private patronage and by systematically underpaying its personnel. It can no longer do so.

The services provided by the arts organizations of the State take a wide variety of forms, ranging from music to museum exhibits, poetry to film, finance to drama, opera to sculpture, literature to multimedia – in short the full spectrum of means by which men and women, in every time and place, have tried to add meaning and value to their lives. The arts are among the

oldest human enterprises of which we have record. We know of no society which has not triven—in color and sound and shape and word and gesture—io pin down in permanent form its feelings and highest aspirations. If the arts in New York State were not regarded as valid and necessary by a substantial and widely distributed number of its citizens, the Council could not and should not exist.

New York State has the largest concentration of cultural resources in the nation. It has three major symphony orchestras—in Buffalo, Rochester, and New York—and in the years since World War II New York City has become the international capital of music. It is the theatre capital, generating plays which are now performed everywhere in the world. It is also the dance capital for both classical and modern dance and something close to the painting capita] as well. New York State's museums are world-renowned and, together with historical societies, they number over five hundred. The arts are what New York is noted for—as Texas is for oil, or iowa for corn. Without its cultural institutions, as Governor Rockefeller has said, this would not be the Empire State.

When the term "arts" is used, moreover, it should always be remembered that this is no bloodless abstraction, but an endless range of living, immediate experience. The arts deal with the human ability to perceive and feel—deal with it, indeed, in the most organized and powerful way we know. They deal with human emotion, with every possible combination of pity and fear and anger and laughter. They deal above all else with pleasure, because they appeal directly to the senses of seeing and hearing and tactile feeling.

Such direct, vital contact between the arts and their public is what keeps them alive, and readers of this annual report will therefore find throughout it an emphasis on the purpose to which public monies have been put, the service provided. The mandate of the Council from the Governor and the Legislature is, among other things, to preserve the artistic heritage of the State, but not by putting it in dead storage, as though in a bank vault. Rather, the Council has been enjoined to make the State's cultural resources more accessible and available, and to larger and broader audiences. For if the arts can be "saved" in our time, they can only be saved by making them an integral part of everyone's daily life, a natural and legitimate activity which does not constantly need to be justified and apologized for.

Paradoxically, those like the members of the upstate art society, for whom the arts are already "a very important part of their lives," sometimes end up agreeing with skeptics like their legislator who think the arts are the concern only of those "who want to indulge in such activities." For those who care about them the arts are their own justification—which is one reason why we defend them so badly, and why some people still regard them as unnecessary. A commitment to the arts is usually made early and irreversibly. There will have been that moment when the glowing colors on the canvas, the unfolding intentions of the playwright, or the intricate interplay of chord and melody demonstrated their power to engage not merely the mind but the entire being. The poet A. E. Housman once said that he could not let a line of poetry come into his head while shaving, since the goosefiesh it caused made him unable to continue.

The satisfaction of the senses, that is, is supposed to be self-sufficient. We are assumed to be happy with what we have got, just as the artist is assumed to derive such ineffable rewards from his work that he need not be paid a living wage. The legislator's view is essentially the same as that of the minority which used to think of the arts (as a few, unhappily, still do) as their private domain, bought and paid for. With this attitude went a tone of hushed reverence before the masterpiece, to make it clear the cognoscenti knew something you didn't, which effectively drove away whatever members of the general public had not already been antagonized by pure snobbery.

We are still suffering from this inward-looking complacency, but its days are numbered. What has happened is nothing less than a revolution, a radical transformation in the relationship between art and society in the United States. What was once peripheral and functionally dispensable is now central and essential. What we have witnessed, as Alvin Toffler put it in *The Culture Consumers* in 1964, is a conversion "from cult to culture" – from a minority preoccupation to a major phenomenon permeating the whole society. The nonprofit arts (to use that ugly phrase again) have achieved a social and economic importance so far in excess of their traditional role that our cultural institutions, our systems for supporting them, and – perhaps most of all – our ideas about them are still struggling to catch up.

The many factors which brought this about are familiar: the sustained prosperity of the American middle class, the increase in leisure time, the wider availability of higher education, the growing concern with the quality of life. In combination they have filled the museums with crowds; stimulated the building of new theatres and art centers; brought into existence thousands of new music ensembles, theatre groups, and dance companies; and multiplied the sales of books, phonograph records, painting materials, and musical instruments, in the process they have permanently altered the conditions within which the artist works.

His audience, for one thing, is now enormous. Formerly the major leisure activities outside the home were assumed to be movies and sports, but that is no longer the case. An independent study of arts organizations in New York State for the year 1970-71 conducted by the National Research Center of the Arts (an affiliate of Louis Harris and Associates) confirmed earlier Council staff estimates of huge statewide attendance at arts events. While in the past three years attendance for all professional sports and college basketball has remained stable at about 23 million and the figures for movies have stood at no more than 110 million, those for the nonprofit arts have been increasing appreciably each year. If present trends continue, it is thoroughly possible that in five years the arts audience will be greater than those of sports and movies combined.

The economic impact is no less staggering. The National Research Center survey included independent, nonprofit cultural organizations from all disciplines whose annual budgets are more than \$5,000. These 543 organizations showed total expenditures of \$184 million, covering not only their payrolls but goods and services in their communities ranging from general contracting, printing, advertising and public relations, legal and accounting consultation, cleaning and maintenance, security, mailing and postage, to paper, wood, liability insurance, costumes, cosmetics, and all the materials and equipment necessary to their work. A conservative estimate of the total of these expenditures for 1970-71 is \$23,272,800, of which

about \$6.5 million went to construction activities such as carpentry, plumbing, electrical work, etc., and \$3.1 million to printing alone.

Most noteworthy of all in the National Research Center figures is the function of government money. State support of the nonprofit arts is unusual in that it stimulates vastly larger support from other sources, accomplishes much with little, and is amply returned to the people in the further economic activity it generates. State government support for the arts in New York is exceptional in that the organizations to which it goes receive \$15 in income from other sources for each State tax dollar spent. Furthermore, State funding of these same 543 organizations was \$8.8 million, or slightly less than 5 per cent of their total expenditures, and since they spent more than \$23 million on goods and services, then the State's subsidy was returned to its economy three times over.

Another point too seldom remembered is the economic dependence of commerce and industry on the resources, services, and stimulus of the nonprofit arts for which no charge is made. An obvious example is the connection between the tourist trades in New York State – the hotel, motel, restaurant, taxi, automobile, gasoline, and souvenir business – and the cultural institutions and activities which draw tourists to the State in the first place. But note also that the two major industries of New York City – fashion and communications – are there, and will stay there at some cost to themselves, because they have to, because only there can be found the ideas and energy on which they depend.

Can anyone imagine industrial design in this country, over the past quarter century, without the design collection of The Museum of Modern Art? Can anyone imagine the \$12.5 billion advertising industry without a continual supply – from museums and performing arts centers and from independent writers, painters, musicians, and filmmakers whom it presently does not pay – of the verbal, graphic, musical and cinematic raw material which it indefatigably consumes? In the words of the National Research Center's report, "Few industries with such modest capital and manpower served so many with so much as the arts and cultural industry in 1970-71" – and, one might add, for so little.

Why, then, is state support necessary? It is needed, first of all, because the arts in a modern, industrial-scientific nation operate at a built-in economic disadvantage. They are not able to modernize, as industry can modernize, by using the techniques of mass production. The arts must deal with objects and experiences one by one: the painter paints one painting at a time, the musician must play each piece as though he were just creating it. The result is what Mr. Toffler calls the Law of Inefficiency in Art – namely, that every increase in the technological effectiveness of society puts the arts at a greater relative disadvantage, industry can pay higher wages because its productivity can increase, but those who work in the arts – and who also want cars, and decent housing, and fringe benefits – find themselves linked to institutions which, technologically and economically, cannot move. The glory of the arts, which is their individual humanity and uniqueness, becomes their fatal flaw. They are fixed in place while the rest of the world advances. The result has become a system of self-perpetuating poverty.

Someone has very properly observed that art has always been subsidized in this country; it has been subsidized by the artists themselves. The notion that they will do better work if they starve in a garret has turned out to die hard. Artists are constantly being asked to donate their

services, for example, presumably on the grounds that if they didn't regard money as demeaning they wouldn't be artists. It was also once said that the greatest single piece of legislation for the arts in America has been the Unemployment Compensation Act; until very recently dance companies notoriously scheduled their seasons so that dancers could get maximum unemployment insurance. The same survey of 543 New York State organizations showed that the average income of their administrative directors – usually the highest paid of all staff members – was \$10,203, or less than half the average salary of the State's top level business executives or the average income of its doctors and lawyers.

The arts, moreover, are no different from the many other forms of human endeavor which have proved to be unable to pay their way in a free market. No one could afford education, if we had to pay what it really costs; no one could afford transportation, if we had to pay what it really costs. One by one – along with recreation, conservation, historic preservation, and the like – activities once thought to be the province of private enterprise have passed over into the public sector. Even private industry itself, when disaster strikes, has been known to ask government for subsidy lest jobs be lost or vital functions curtailed. Similarly, without state aid, many arts organizations would go out of existence or restrict their services. The arts are only the most recent, and the most unfamiliar, to join the list. Government support of them can be thought of as a high-performance additive, if you like – the margin of excellence and availability.

Coming as late as we have, the New York State Council on the Arts has tried to apply the lessons learned by those who have preceded us in the experience of administering government support. We have tried to avoid formulas, to retain both flexibility and the power to make decisions on a basis of quality. It is a relatively new thing in government to allocate funds according to value judgments, and being new it is not always very well understood or accepted. Not everyone is pleased by the results. A former State official who is one of the Council's most valued advisors remarked not long ago that he had at last discovered what our job was. "What you are supposed to do," he said, "is systematically distribute dissatisfaction around the State on an unequal basis." He has a point.

In other words, because we try to make the money count, to put each dollar where it will do the most good, the Council has to risk the unpopularity of saying No. Council policy is never to be the sole support of any organization and, under the terms of our appropriation act, we are required to ask applicants what they propose doing to secure income from other sources. We are also vitally interested in the strategies of their growth, in helping them be strong both artistically and administratively. We try to be sensitive to their problems, respectful of their priorities, interested in their affairs.

The Council responds, essentially, to an application form in which an organization states its needs. This will be judged according to guidelines set forth in broad terms by the Legislature and refined by discussions between the Council and the Division of the Budget, namely: the area and population to be reached, the quality of the program, the degree of public service, the amount of income or the lack of it, and the ability of the organization to do what it proposes to do. Among these criteria the emphasis will vary, but normally a total failure to meet a given one of them would be disqualifying. That is to say, a small, private museum might meet every

standard of excellence, but if it offered no public service there would be little justification to help maintain it with public funds.

The money can go for many things: to mount exhibits, put on productions, pay salaries, conduct workshops, hold poetry readings, provide technical assistance, play concerts, set up summer festivals, create new works, and so on and on. Sometimes, though only in special circumstances, it simply serves to support overall operating expenses. In general, the purposes intended are three: (1) to identify, conserve, or sustain a cultural resource, (2) to develop a resource through controlled growth, and (3) to bring new resources into existence through innovation and creativity. Behind all three is very plainly the aim of maintaining and increasing the health and well-being of the arts in New York State.

To keep these varied factors and implements in balance is, putting it mildly, a complex task; In order to keep the process of judgment open and responsible, we try to share it around among a number of people; usually over thirty will be involved in evaluating a single application, of whom at least a third will have had experience in the field at issue. There will be review by the Council staff, both artistic and fiscal, then by a panel of outside professionals, and finally by the Council itself, which consists of fifteen citizens known for their distinction and interest in the arts, who are appointed by the Governor (with the consent of the Senate) and serve without pay for five-year terms. No allocation of funds is authorized without the Council's approval, and its decisions are of course final.

Though in fact there was an earlier arts council – the Utah Art Institute, founded in 1899 – the New York State Council on the Arts developed during the first dozen years of its existence on the assumption that there were no precedents. Its techniques evolved on pragmatic, empirical terms; what we are still doing is what turned out to work. The Council has not so much a philosophy as many philosophies, for there are few rules which will work in all cases. Arts organizations are so various, their situations so different, the range so great from the large to the small, that no single approach would be effective.

Moreover, in the Council's experience, what appear to be conflicting alternatives are often nothing of the kind. Large and small institutions, for example, are not adversaries but partners. Innovative and sustaining programs are not opposed, but necessary, to one another. The amateur uses the professional to learn from and the professional uses the amateur to recruit from. Excellence and equity are not irreconcilable ideals. And it is true in the arts, if not always elsewhere, that New York City and the rest of the State have a fruitful interrelationship. In each of these polarities there is constant and reciprocal action, flowing both ways. It might even be argued that the reason the avant-garde prospers in New York is that it has the Establishment to be angry at.

The Council's aim, therefore, is quite literally to act on each application one at a time, according to its merits, in terms of the programs proposed, as the conditions of the present moment require. Funding is not automatic and cannot be guaranteed from year to year. In the first place, the Legislature quite properly would not permit such a thing and, in the second, the Council's appropriation may vary from one year to the next. Also, the climate within the arts community may change; a particular art form may at one moment seem more in need of aid than another. And, lastly, the economic health of a given organization may fluctuate; it may

suddenly be in trouble, as are many in the Southern Tier which were devastated by the flood, or it may – equally suddenly – have received a large benefaction (though in the latter case, to be sure, the Council tries not to penalize an organization for its enterprise or good fortune).

What, then, does the Council look for? It looks above all for quality. Since it cannot sustain every artistic endeavor in the State, it must restrict itself to aiding those of more than recreational and sentimental value. Since it is charged with the economic future of the arts in New York, it must before all else have a care for those whose level of ability is such that they can make the arts their primary, full-time concern – that is, who are professionals. Second, it looks for vitality. Since it hopes to see its own money multiply many times over, it seeks out those self-generating activities and individuals who need only marginal assistance, a leg up to get them over the top. Third, it looks for continuity. Since, ultimately, the Council should make itself as unnecessary as possible, it hopes to discover those measures which will preserve and increase that pluralistic contribution to the arts from business and private patrons by which its own influence can be kept from getting out of hand.

The Council stands midway between the world of the arts and the world of government; it is the ambassador and interpreter of each to the other. "Your problem," a wise New York State newspaperman has said, "is that you have to face in two directions at once. From one side you have to look like a bunch of certified public accountants, and from the other like you're really with it – and sometimes you get caught facing the wrong way." True enough, but that slight embarrassment is small price to pay for the privilege of bringing together, on the one hand the unexampled power of government to improve the lives of its citizens, and on the other the unexampled power of the arts to make those lives worth living.

What the New York State Council on the Arts most definitely does not wish to see itself become is a paper-heavy organization largely dedicated to its own self-preservation, for in an ideal universe all bureaucracies (and, like it or not, we are bureaucrats) should self-destruct occasionally and start all over. Nor does it have the objective of "creating" art, which would be arrogant and presumptuous. The role of an arts council – as we understand it – should rather be thought of as ecological: to prepare the conditions in which art could occur; to clear the aesthetic air and water, to nourish the cultural soil. The society which resulted would be one in which no person wanting the sustenance to mind and psyche that the arts provide would be denied it, in which neither rural isolation nor urban poverty would be a bar to drawing on the artistic resources of the State, in which artists themselves would no longer be economically second-class citizens. It would be a society in which the arts would be valued for what they are, an essential component of a balanced existence and a thriving culture, and would take their proper place, not on the edges of life in New York State, but at its very center.

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